Northern Exchange

Beauval
Creighton
Fond du Lac
Ile-a-la-Crosse
La Loche
La Ronge
Pelican Narrows
Sandy Bay
Stony Rapids

Spring 2002

A discussion with Residents of Northern Saskatchewan

Introduction

We, the Provincial Ombudsman, the Children's Advocate and the Chief Commissioner of the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, were aware that many residents in northern Saskatchewan face challenges different than those common to southern residents. We were also aware that many northern residents live in circumstances of isolation, poverty, illness, neglect and abuse and that resources for coping with such circumstances may differ from those available in more populated regions of the province. Many northern residents rely, in varying degree, on government services. These are the precise circumstances that sometimes lead people to our offices.

We have been concerned, therefore, that residents of northern Saskatchewan are under-represented among our complainants. We speculated—individually and collectively—that it might be that northern communities are not familiar with our offices or our work. It might be that the nature of our services was not perceived as appropriate to the need. It might be that residents of northern areas have developed other mechanisms to address needs that our offices might otherwise serve. It might be all three or something else entirely.

We all take seriously our obligations to the province of Saskatchewan and were concerned that we might not be reaching out to our entire constituency. Rather than speculating, we decided to talk to residents in the north. We wanted to hear their concerns about rights, fairness, equality and equity and to learn how each of our offices might provide more effective and more valuable services.

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Sandy Bay, Saskatchewan – October 2001

Who We Are

Provincial Ombudsman

The Office of the Provincial Ombudsman receives complaints from members of the public who believe that they have been treated unfairly by provincial government departments and agencies. The Ombudsman may assist the parties to find a resolution through alternative case resolution or may conduct a thorough and impartial investigation of the matter. If the Ombudsman concludes that there was unfairness in the government's action or decision, she will make recommendations to government and/or the Legislative Assembly for rectification of the individual situation or for administrative improvements or both. The Ombudsman also engages in public education about the office and its role.

Children's Advocate Office

The Children's Advocate has authority to promote the interests of, and act as a voice for, children who have concerns about provincial government services. The Children's Advocate Office engages in public education, works to resolve disputes, and conducts independent investigations. The Children's Advocate also recommends improvements to programs for children to the government and/or the Legislative Assembly.

Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission

The Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission protects and promotes human rights within Saskatchewan. The Commission investigates and resolves complaints of discrimination in employment, education, public services (such as restaurants, stores, hotels, government services, etc.), publications, contracts and housing. The Commission also promotes rights through public education and equity programs.

The Commission is empowered to resolve complaints of individual and systemic discrimination in important areas of public life, including employment, education, housing, public services, publications and contracts. The Commission can approve and monitor employment equity and education equity programs, designed to prevent, eliminate or reduce disadvantages suffered by groups of individuals in the workplace or in educational institutions. The Commission also conducts public human rights education to further the principles of individual equality and cultural diversity.

From left to right: Barbara Tomkins, Deborah Parker-Loewen, and Donna Scott. Photo taken in Stony Rapids, Saskatchewan.

Beauval

Located on the scenic Beaver River, the northern Metis village of Beauval is 108 kilometres north of Green Lake. The community has a population* of 1,039.

Creighton

The town of Creighton with a population of 1,790 is located on the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border near Flin Flon. The Hanson Lake Road connects Creighton with Prince Albert, 410 kilometres away. Creighton serves as the commercial and government centre for the northeast region.

*Note: All populations listed in this report are based on Saskatchewan Health, *Covered Population 2001*.

Where We Went

During four separate trips in November 2000, May 2001, October 2001 and January 2002, we, together with members of our respective staffs, visited nine northern communities: Beauval, Creighton, Fond du Lac, Ile-a-la-Crosse, La Loche, Pelican Narrows, Sandy Bay, Stony Rapids and La Ronge. We had planned and hoped to visit Black Lake but cancelled the visit due to a death in the community.

We were impressed by how large, geographically, the northern region of Saskatchewan is. The northern three health districts, occupy about 317,000 square kms, an area slightly smaller than the Northern Administrative District. This represents almost half the surface area of the province. It was pointed out to us that the distance from Saskatoon to Uranium City is greater than the distance between Regina and Dryden, Ontario. The population of the northern three health districts in Saskatchewan is approximately 34,000 and predominantly of Aboriginal ancestry, including Cree, Dene and Metis peoples. The north has a young, growing population with 35 percent under 15 years of age, as compared to 20 percent throughout the remainder of Saskatchewan.

Fond du Lac

The Fond du Lac First Nations Community, with a population of 550, is at the eastern end of Lake Athabasca. It is a fly-in community, located approximately 700 kilometres north of Prince Albert.

Ile-a-la-Crosse

The northern village of Ile a la Crosse, with a population of 1,551, is located beside Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse. The lake provides commercial fishing and recreation. More than 70 percent of its population is under 17 years of age.

Who We Met

In each community we held an informal public meeting or attended meetings with community agencies. Some attracted large numbers of people and some, much smaller groups. All of the meetings were valuable to us and, we hope, to those who came.

Our guests included:

- elders
- police
- band councillors
- social workers
- community residents
- mayors and municipal leaders
- health care workers
- students
- teachers and school administrators

In some communities, we were fortunate to meet also with groups of community leaders representing municipal governments, First Nations governments, community development organizations and others who have taken a leadership role in their communities.

Whether community leaders or community residents, we were constantly impressed by the level of concern, commitment and passion, demonstrated for these communities and their development. These northern communities are in very good hands.

La Loche

La Loche has a total population of 2,874. Many federal and provincial government departments maintain offices in La Loche. There is a local hospital, the La Loche Health Centre.

What We Did

The structure of our meetings varied from community to community, depending on the numbers and interests of our guests. In most communities we provided a brief overview of our offices—our roles, jurisdiction and the nature of our work. We engaged in question and answer sessions. We had group and individual discussions. Each of our agencies conducted private interviews respecting individual, personal complaints. Most important, we listened as residents described the challenges facing their communities and their interest in finding solutions.

La Ronge

La Ronge is formerly the headquarters for the Department of Northern Saskatchewan. It is the largest community in the north. La Ronge has a population of 4,436, including primarily Cree, Metis, Non-Aboriginal and other Aboriginal people from across the north.

What We Heard

We suspect that none of the issues raised will be new to our readers; they were not new to us. It is somewhat unusual, however, for residents to have the opportunity to raise all concerns in one forum, but the breadth of the combined jurisdiction of our offices allowed that opportunity. This gave us a better context to hear those concerns and to better understand how one issue invariably related to others. The number and range of concerns raised was truly staggering.

The next two pages are a brief listing of the concerns that were most commonly raised. It must be emphasized however, that the listing shows the concerns in the manner in which they were put to us by community residents. We have not investigated or reached conclusions on any.

Northern Residents said they wanted to see:

HOUSING

Adequate social and affordable housing and more satisfactory housing (i.e. overcrowding).
Fair policies for allocating available social housing.
Better or fair policies for determining the rents for social housing.
An increase in the Rural Rehabilitation Assistance Program (federal) ceiling.

EDUCATION

More teachers.
A higher number of teachers per student.
Improved education opportunities to the equivalent of those available in southern schools.
Similar educational standards as those in southern schools.
Recognition of the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.
Increased representation on school boards.
More recreational facilities for children and youth.
Increased opportunities for post-secondary education and training.

EMPLOYMENT

Increased employment opportunities.
Address language barriers that prevent necessary apprenticeship training.
Address language barriers that hamper opportunities for employment.
Increased training for volunteer firefighters.
Increased opportunities (reduced barriers) for Aboriginal people in hiring/promotion within the public service.

HEALTH/SOCIAL ISSUES

Increased representation on district health boards.
Adequate numbers of public health nurses.
Adequate mental health services.
Adequate pre-natal services.
Adequate local addiction services.
Adequate home care services.
Adequate seniors' residences.
Adequate numbers of child protection workers.
Adequate numbers of day care facilities.
Adequate safe houses for battered spouses.
Comparable cost of food.
Reduction in the high cost of living, generally.

JUSTICE

Accessible police services.
Appropriate court facilities.
Adequate correctional facilities to reduce the necessity of incarceration in southern institutions.
Fair treatment of Aboriginal people by police services.

MISCELLANEOUS

Access on a regular and routine basis to Provincial politicians.
Direct and personal access to government services.
New and improved roads.
Involvement in policy development.
Comparable services between on-reserve and off-reserve.

Pelican Narrows

The community has a population of 1,328. The majority of residents are members of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. Pelican Narrows is located 120 kilometres from Creighton.

Sandy Bay

The village of Sandy Bay has a population of 1,062 and is located on the south shore of the Churchill River. It is 190 kilometres by road northwest to Creighton.

We learned a lot. We learned that there are challenges distinct to specific communities but far more that are faced by all. We learned that some of these challenges are unique to northern communities but others have application across the province, though their effects may be different in other areas. We learned that there is a role for our offices but that we may have to retool our practices to more effectively assist members of these communities.

What The Future May Hold

As a result of what we heard in our meetings, we are considering various options. Some will involve our individual offices and individual planning, but some may most effectively and economically be accomplished co-operatively. Some options are:

1. Increase the profile and accessibility of each of our offices for residents of northern communities.
2. While respecting local dynamics, develop partnerships between our offices and members of the community.
3. Develop key contacts in northern communities to act as a liaison between community members and our offices.
4. Have staff members attend more frequently to northern communities, including community events.
5. Ensure that when members of our staffs travel to northern communities for a specific purpose, they attempt to meet with northern stakeholders (e.g. community leaders, program managers, band councillors, chiefs, school officials and government officials) in order to promote community awareness about our offices.
6. Establish a regular circuit to visit northern communities.
7. Assess various alternatives for effective service to small geographically remote communities.

Fond du Lac -- October 2001

Stony Rapids

The northern hamlet of Stony Rapids, with a population of 838, is located on the south shore of Fond du Lac River. It is a fly-in community.

Sources:

Saskatchewan Health, Corporate Information and Technology Branch. *Covered Population 2001.* (www.health.gov.sk.cainfo_center_publications_covpop2001/)

Northern Affairs Department Community Profiles.

Northern Saskatchewan Social Development Review Final Report 1998.

Dr. James Irvine
Medical Health Officer
Population Health Unit
Athabasca Health Authority,
Keewatin Yathe and Mamawetan Churchill River Health District.

IN OUR OWN WORDS

Provincial Ombudsman
Barbara Tomkins

I would like, first, to thank community residents and leaders for the opportunity to travel to the most beautiful parts of Saskatchewan and discover more of its wonderful secrets. More important, I appreciated our candid discussions about very important matters. I am convinced that my office can provide valuable assistance to northern residents but I am not convinced that our current practices fit as well as they could with your circumstances. Your confidence in my office encourages me to take steps to ensure that we are better known and more accessible to residents of northern Saskatchewan.

Children's Advocate
Deborah Parker-Loewen

This series of meetings in northern communities, combined with my other limited experiences in northern Saskatchewan had a profound impact on me. My staff and I sincerely appreciate that you, as northern residents, took the time and had the patience to help us begin to understand some of the challenges facing northern children and families. We recognize we have much more to learn from you and that our Office needs to do more to work with you to ensure that the rights of northern children today and in the future are respected. As a result of your input, we have started to reorganize our advocacy services with a greater emphasis on northern children.

Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission
Donna Scott, Chief Commissioner

Like my colleagues, I am grateful for the opportunity to have met with so many residents from the northern communities we visited. Along with members of my staff, I appreciate the warm welcome we received and the interest your communities took in our office.

Many of the issues raised in the north relate to a broad range of human rights matters, including those related to economic, social and cultural rights. As such, the Commission recognizes the need to be more accessible to northern communities than we have been in the past. We know that making a concerted effort to serve people in the north is not without its challenges, but we are nonetheless committed to doing so. We will continue to look for ways to make human rights protection and promotion more meaningful in the north.